

Promoting Safety Culture in Romanian Organizations as a Pillar of Occupational Health and Safety Management

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Abstract

Nowadays, numerous organizations in Romania are aiming to improve health, safety and wellbeing at work conditions. Certain companies, having given these conditions such a high level of priority that, beyond compliance with legislative requirements, are trying to create a culture of safety built into their corporate culture. Integration of occupational health and safety management at all levels is increasingly perceived as an effective way to develop a strong and sustainable safety culture, which is the best way to ensure compliance with legislative requirements and social expectations and as well to obtain economic benefits. The aim of the present article is to express in a systematic, coherent and pragmatic manner the meaning and interconnections of the three pillars that now are considered necessary to effectively implement safety management and occupational health processes in global economic performance conditions for Romanian organizations.

Keywords

Safety Culture; Occupational Health and Safety Management; Participatory Approach

The Meaning of Organizational Safety Culture

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) can be “viewed” as a concept within an organization that is implemented and managed to a certain extent, or it can be accepted as a functioning underpinning of the organization’s goals and values (Moraru & Băbuț, 2010).

One of the ways in which the second definition can be realized is by the incorporation of OHS into the culture of the organization, which in turn depends on the overall governance, including factors such as corporate social responsibility, social accountability and corporate sustainability. While there are differences between these interlinked concepts, and once a business engages in one, it can quickly impact

on the others. The following section examines the impact of OHS on the processes of governance and culture within organizations, especially in the context of its integration into the management systems of organizations. The Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian language defines culture as “*all the values, symbols, concepts, beliefs, patterns of behavior and activity materials that characterize the lifestyle of a social group*” (Academy of Romania, 2009). Cultural orientation of an organization should be based on values and attitudes that generate certain behavioral patterns (see. FIG. 1).

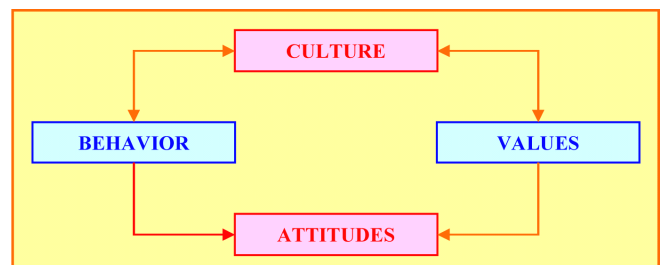


FIG. 1 CULTURAL ORIENTATION OF A SOCIETY/ORGANIZATION

Within the management of safety, health and wellbeing at work, organizational culture is the system of values, beliefs, philosophies, postulates, norms of behavior, attitudes, expectations and common business rules, shared by peers, to ensure strong internal cohesion, indispensable to pull together and achieve the desired results. Other cultural features are also important, such as:

- Culture is a true way of life for members of the organization. Culture of organizations is evident, frequently, only when compared with other organizations or when subjected to change.
- Since culture involves assumptions, values and

basic beliefs, it tends to be quite stable over time. In addition, once a culture is well established, it may persist despite turnover, to ensure social continuity.

- The content of a culture may involve both internal and external factors with respect to the organization. Internally, culture can support innovation, stimulate risk-taking or support information secret keeping. Externally, a culture can support the slogan "the customer above all" or unethical behavior of competitors.
- Culture can have a major impact on organizational performance and satisfaction of its members, significantly reducing the stress in the workplace.

Emerging Labor Market Developments and OHS Organizational Learning

Several OHS management models are supporting the idea that health and safety issues must be solved sooner "upstream" (through cultural nature efforts such as technical and organizational design), instead of "downstream", through Behavioral Safety, for example, as outlined by Shaw & Blewett, 2006. Efforts should be focused to examine the atmosphere and culture of organizations and the resulting systems. Upstream factors predictive for downstream events may serve to control the latter. After Zwetsloot et al. (2006; 2007), traditional safety strategies (i.e. those intended to control technological risks and protect people against the related hazards) seem to become less and less effective in an increasingly complex world of work, which is in a continuous and rapid change.

The national prevention organisms on occupational risks, the European social partners share very similar views on current labor market developments. World economy getting global use of new information and communication technologies and new production technologies is a matter of current professional activities. The socio-economic changes occurring on increasingly open markets and an ever fiercer competition conditions, are forcing companies to improve their competitiveness.

Internal changes resulting from economic organizations, adopting strategies oriented mainly to the economic outcome, are leading to translation of responsibilities of business and are requiring a degree of versatility to the workers. Trades and professions

turn, existing in parallel with the emergence of completely new ones. Labor structure and hence, working conditions, are undergoing major and profound changes. If the new widely applied technologies contribute, on the one hand, improve working conditions, they may, on the other hand, generate new risks, poorly known and controlled among the most eloquent examples hovering nanotechnology. For this particular area, it has reached the consensus on recognition of the current lack of knowledge about their possible negative consequences for human health, worker safety and the environment in general. Between high level technologies, the information and communication technologies have generated the development of new trades, such as counselors in call centers.

In parallel with technological advances, there is a significant trend of "aging" population and increases in the share of female population in the whole working population. Increasing the legal retirement age limit in Romania, together with the general demographic decline, leads to the share of "seniors" workers in the active population to increase significantly. Finally, an increasing proportion of the population is employed in precarious, unstable employment situations. Therefore, this category has less appropriate levels in terms of working conditions, training in safety and occupational health and occupational health monitoring, in relation to permanent employees. Typically, this category is subject to a greater degree of physical and mental demands. These evolution trends to influence organizations, working conditions and ways of organization the activities related to prevent occupational risks. Current debates engaged in professional risk (suicide at work, psychosocial risks, dependencies), which is an eloquent testimony of these mutations. New stresses of vision, hearing system, physical and mental capabilities, musculoskeletal system-joints and the cardiovascular structures, while chemical and biological risks are constantly highlighted as being, wholly or partly, work-related.

However, the perception of occupational risks has significantly evolved with time. They are not anymore accepted with fatalism as "part of the job". Above all these specific developments, overlapping also is the general trend of "regulating" the society and labor relations. The public bodies responsible for prevention and control of risks, insurers, social partners and public authorities, both national and European ones,

are trying to address new risks and threats to occupational health and safety risks, gathered together in the phrase "emerging risks"; and these risks, as those considered "classic" must be prevented and controlled.

Present recurring debates on the emerging risk multifactorial determination, confirms the correctness of such an approach. Very often, one of the origins of accidents is directly related to inadequate organization of labor and, in general, inadequate management of occupational safety and health. If musculoskeletal disorders are directly caused by handling heavy loads and repetitive gestures, stress combined with the physical constraints will be an aggravating factor in the emergence of specific pathologies. This combined and synergetic action would be extremely difficult to quantify as a percentage, providing an example of emerging risk multifactorial, with multiple determination.

This kind of development requires adapting the methods of control of labor inspectors, taking into account ergonomic aspects related to planning and checking that job training topics of workers include also risks of this complex nature. It was stated before that population is ageing and this leads to significant demographic changes in the labor market. When we think about preventing accidents, it should be considered that the effects of occupational exposure to various emerging risks and aging simultaneously with the new work environment. Work systems and work processes must be adapted to become more friendly to the human factor, so that employees can benefit from throughout their career and care for human health. To enable this, one of the most important elements is the ability to learn throughout life. It is necessary to pay sufficient attention to training opportunities, part time work and other factors specific for the job (supporting and training young workers).

In the studies regarding OHS integration into core business, Gort, Starren and Zwetsloot (2006) are strong that how "organizational learning" is organized in companies, which is often the critical factor in achieving adequate performance, and the impact of "learning", seen on this perspective, seems more important than the effect exerted by the "structure" and "culture". It concluded that at least three aspects (structure, culture and learning) should always be approached in a balanced and explicit manner. FIG. 2 illustrates Gort's and his collaborators learning model.

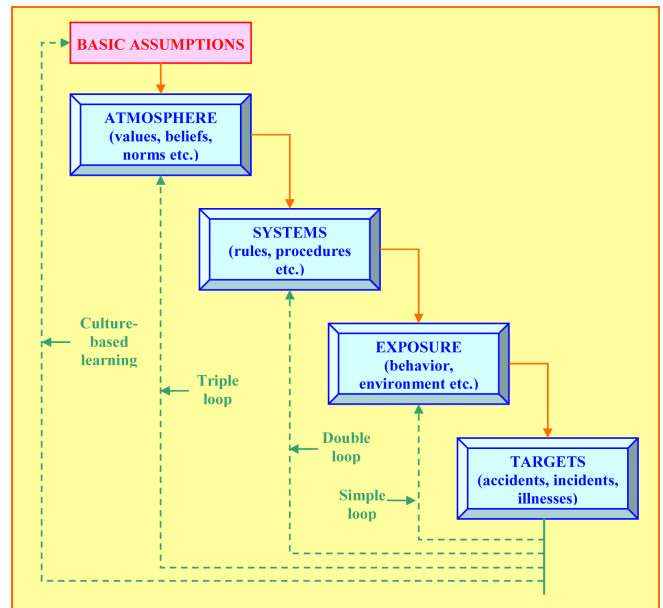


FIG. 2 LEARNING LOOPS FOR OSH IMPROVEMENT IN GORT'S MODEL (GORT., STARREN AND ZWETSLOOT, 2006)

Within the model there are four feed-back loops ("learning" loops) on the OHS, allowing assessment of the degree to which learning was developed in an organization. Any organization can improve its safety performance trying to aim as high as possible following this model. The four loops of feed-back largely correspond to the four stages of maturity of the organizational management of OHS (ad-hoc, systematic, systemic and proactive) set by Zwetsloot (2007). It is persuaded that, indeed, the triple loop, completed with cultural learning should become an integral part of any approach to OHS management, in order to establish and maintain a proactive behavior in organizations. Some basic principles can guide the initiation and development approach to an organizational culture of safety in Romania, as outlined by Cioca and Moraru (2010), as given bellow:

- **Promoting safety begins with education and changing attitudes:** promoting safety requires positive attitudes. Integration of safety promotion is closely linked to attitudes and behavior. This should be done as early as possible and is essential to promote safety awareness to be integrated into education systems.
- **Promoting safety goes beyond legal compliance:** while accident prevention may be a legal and statutory requirement, promoting safety is closely linked to innovation in the initial processes. Promoting safety may not be and really isn't required by law.

- **Promoting safety and accident prevention are mutually reinforcing one another:** we need to add elements of good practice to the requirements of legislation. Examples of good practice are becoming increasingly important as legislation provides not only a framework.
- **Comparative analysis applied to safety performance is compulsory:** many companies compare their own safety performance only with the those of their competitors. To promote safety one should encourage cross-sector and corporate benchmarking. Comparative analysis ("benchmarking") allows us not only to compare the statistics, but also to seek examples of good practice. To measure positive action in occupational safety and health, different approaches are needed.
- **Safety at work is a human and corporate value:** it is necessary to develop a positive culture of risk management. Risk management which is an integral part of the organization, must be taken into account. Safety must be integrated at an early stage of the production process, such as the design stage. Developing a safety culture is advantageous for companies. They can thus improve their safety performance, to improve the involvement and motivation of the workforce, to improve their social responsibility and realize, perhaps, also cost savings. In addition to anticipative forecasts having the nature of reflection, there will be imagined and then developed solutions and ways to intervene early to avoid any irreversible damage associated with prohibitive financial and social costs. The difficulty will be to ensure a consistent safety and health policy centered on the worker in an increasingly complex world of work, in perpetual and rapid change, which requires workers more flexibility. Overcoming this difficulty involves the concept of anticipation and the precautionary principle.

Workers Participation: a Foundation of Safety Culture Development

Romanian organizations are addressing OHS issues in various ways, ranging from the reactive to the systematic, proactive or generative approach. Applying the standards of safety management system does not guarantee that OHS issues are actually

incorporated into decision-making processes that determine major aspects of working conditions. As the OHS management is more closely related to core economic activities, the OHS performance will increase in terms of organizational change, especially in the specific conditions of economic crisis, the mergers, the staff reductions and rapid technological innovations (EASHW, 2004; Frick & Wren, 2000; Frick, 2006). The problem is that occupational safety and health is given a lower priority in most cases, while the production aspects are considered more pressing. Promoting OHS as a firm policy agenda is to discuss and attempt resolution of conflict situations, by making reasonable compromises. Therefore, a track of positive record in OSH involves more than implementing a formalized structure, such as an OHS management system, whether integrated in other systems (quality, environment, etc.). Organizations must also address the cultural and political aspects related to work.

Developing a culture of continuous improvement and involvement/participation of all employees will generate positive effects on health and safety performance. What does it really mean and involve? In many Romanian companies employees are "consulted" through questionnaires, in studies initiated and led by professionals. In this case it is preferable to speak of consultation rather than participation. Participation can be defined as the direct collaboration, active and equal of workers with the hierarchical structure and business life, based on sufficient information and power to establish and maintain an optimal state of health, safety and welfare of staff and technical and economic health the enterprise. This definition highlights two fundamental aspects: (i) participation has a specific purpose: improvement on working and living conditions of workers, and (ii) the partners are on equal footing.

The type of participation to which we refer is that allows the adoption and implementation decisions based on a negotiated agreement, which integrates temporal and financial imperatives. We speak rather of a "*participatory process*", based on continuous monitoring of pragmatic change management operations, process having the following essential features (Moraru & Băbuț, 2010):

- it must relate to the whole work system and seek review of all technical, organizational and psychosocial components of the work situation;

- it is continuously integrated into daily management of the enterprise, not a punctual and occasional operation;
- it must be voluntary: workers and the hierarchical structure of personal should have the conviction to participate knowingly and not because they are required, for example by targeting requirements of management system certification;
- the process should be straightforward: workers and technical staff should be involved directly, not only through their representatives in the committees of occupational safety and health;
- the process must be active: staff is involved in the local working groups, which become "engines" of ensuring the occupational health, safety and wellbeing in the context of work situations.

The participation process must take place in a climate of trust and mutual respect. The system must be designed from the start and accepted by all interested persons to be able to monitor the daily operation and you could face values and objectives, to extract lessons, using an appropriate legal case. Changing the organizational culture itself, such a participatory process will create prerequisites to integrate these concerns in all parts of enterprise management (orders, purchases, services, supplies, etc). Certainly, such a goal can not be concerned at first, but the scheme is known from Deming's continuous improvement loop (Deming, 1982) and, more specifically, as the slope that rises the wheel of progress (FIG. 3).

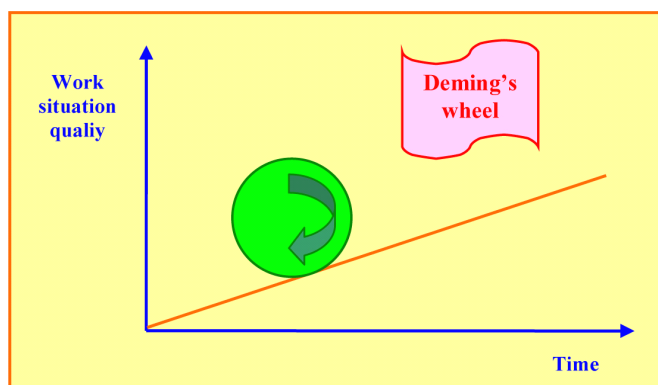


FIG. 3 DEMING'S PRINCIPLE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The preventive approach requires both knowledge and understanding of the employment situation. Worker must be the main actor and not just the object or "the assisted" of the prevention. Moreover, the worker should be considered as the main actor of all

parties involving in the prevention field. Under such an approach, the worker is not only a source of data and information to "the competent" professional whose task is to listen, to understand, analyze and interpret the work, to draw conclusions and propose measures to prevent. It will be acknowledged and accepted that the worker knows not only what he "lives", but also what he "wants". He is at the heart of prevention, while the individuals responsible for training and developing his training and, as necessary, specific skills needed to increase the effectiveness of prevention and to improve worker safety culture. On the other hand, it would be utopian, even demagogic, to accept that workers and their technical management have sufficient knowledge of all risks and that their opinion is sufficient. The level of knowledge depends on the awareness, training degree and health and safety skills they have at some point and it may be considerably limited, especially for certain categories of staff (new employees, trainees, seasonal workers, etc.) or in certain sectors (construction, mining, etc). It is however a reality that the worker is trying to influence his work situation to work better, more comfortable, faster (which is a risk in itself, under uncontrolled conditions). Giving them the opportunity to express themselves and placing them in the main actor position, the employee is encouraged to "think" their work situation, to develop safety culture, becoming the first applicant for additional training, instead of remaining a more or less passive receiver.

At all stages of development of safety concerns, the participation of workers is enhanced by facilitating monitoring communication, so the situation is not reversed, and the system to evolve towards a superior state in the own pace of each economic organizations, following the scheme illustrated in FIG. 4. It is essential that enterprise management policy is coherent (congruence), or to make an explicit reflection, so that the objectives of safety and health at work are compatible with corporate objectives and these two categories of objectives, often conflicting, to be integrated. The participatory process can actually lead to a cultural redefinition of management.

Because the initial state of climate is far from the described one above, the most important points to be addressed by top management are the following:

- ensure consistency of social and economic policy;
- transfer the policy to subordinate hierarchical structure;

- create a clear system of information, full, timely, on-the-workers, in order to avoid rumor, misperception, misunderstanding, fear and opposition.

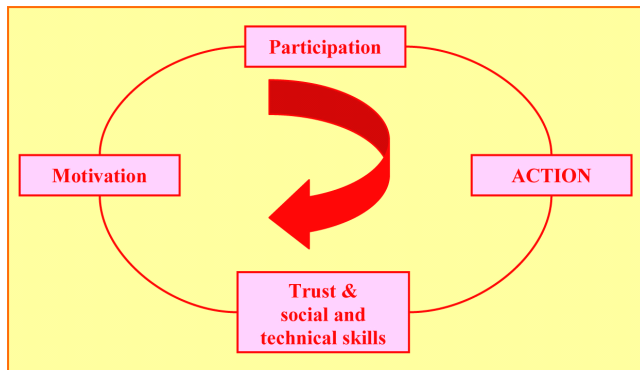


FIG. 4 BASIC ELEMENTS OF IMPROVING WORK SITUATION

The position of the hierarchical structure must of course be derived from the top management. However, being closer to the real work situations, the hierarchical structure will be more in position to translate general objectives into specific, realistic, flexible and measurable objectives, given the time and financial restrictions.

In the first stage of the participatory process, there will be some adopted decisions, and some technical improvements to be made, as well as the change of attitudes and increase motivation and confidence. It is however possible that the state of the system returns to the original one (or even worse condition, for a first experience missed) if, at the right time, a second approach failed to employed to aim at the structural changes materialization. This second stage can neither be started nor too early, when the proposed actions have nor yet been implemented, nor too late, when the situation begins to deteriorate. The process will therefore be continuously monitored to determine when the participatory process is judiciously revived. The energy required to initiate and ensure the process continuity is represented by arrows in FIG. 5. Inertia is significant in the initial stage due to misunderstandings, lack of trust, resistance to change, fear of the unknown, cowardice or laziness.

The importance of trade unions in developing and maintaining state security and health is undeniable. Unions perceive issues from the perspective of workers, know the history of the organization and have a global vision. The importance of trade unions in developing and maintaining a good occupational safety and health state is undeniable.

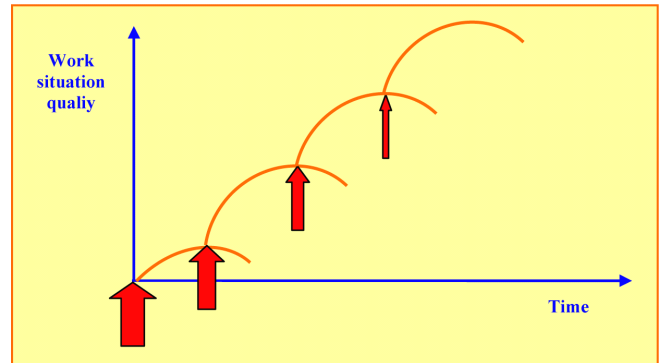


FIG. 5 SCHEMATIC REPRESENTATION OF THE ITERATIVE PROCESS OF IMPROVEMENT OF WORK SITUATION QUALITY

Workers' representatives in the Health and Safety Committees at Work have (or should have) some training and experience in the field, which gives them (at least hypothetically) a privileged position in the development cycle expressed by Deming's loop. Workers' representatives should be directly involved in the participatory assessment and risk management process. In some cases, their enthusiasm for direct and active involvement can be tempered because of fear of being "short circuit", of the desire to be "sole interlocutor" or fear that the initiative will highlight issues that they would have had to deal with already. Such incentives can induce a dark place of steadiness waiting, like that adopted by some hierarchical structure. The participatory process also contributes to changing the worker's image of himself, as a result of:

- develop a sense of control over its own working environment;
- increase self-esteem, awareness of self-worth, as a result of which can be heard and, most importantly, understood;
- improving knowledge of how the work integrates the enterprise and its place in relation to other activities.

Arriving at this point, it should be remembered that it is not a brutal development, but a progressive development that involves continuous and stepwise improvement of knowledge and organizational culture. Contrary to what is generally considered, this trend affects not only workers but the hierarchical structure of management and technical staff. Participation fosters curiosity, self-analysis capability, design intelligence and as a consequence, the search for new information and the desire of self-improvement. Interest and understanding in relation to the participatory process in the enterprise is spreading and is generalized. People are becoming

more able to adapt to these new working conditions and learn to value their knowledge in other work situations.

Conclusions

A major component of developing an organizational culture of safety is teamwork training. The most significant elements of this type of training is learning group communication, cooperation and organization of work, the internal dynamics of the group, the initiatives within its management and personal responsibility of each member. Communication training involves personal expression improvement, spontaneity of the response, the ability to listen to the other. Training for cooperation involves stimulating the trends of coordination with others to solve complex working tasks. Joint organization of work requires individuals to clarify goals and steps needed to achieve them, the perception of task structure and its specific requirements, providing distribution of roles to take on the most appropriate, rational organization of each action.

Changing the culture of safety can be achieved "by force" (in which case the results may not be at all as expected) or by gradual development. Awareness of best practices will help change the "natural" culture and adapt accordingly to the measure in which production of other types of organizational changes occur. Explicit involvement and demonstrated commitment of top management, seminars and campaigns organized properly, correct flow of information and the statutory relations of mutual trust are the way of increased security culture, in ways that more than perfect formal structure will be impacted, which is not understood or not accepted by people.

A management system that fails to motivate ALL employees and reinforce the safety culture will exert little impact on improving the safety and health at work in the enterprise, so its effectiveness is questionable. That is why we believe that structural aspects are as much important as the cultural ones, within the approach of incorporating OSH management procedures and processes in any organization. OSH management systems should be seen not only as "functional systems" but as "social systems", in which people are playing vital and effective parts. In the above context, organizational learning processes are a critical success factor. They should become part of OHS management, to

amalgamate cultural change and encourage proactive, pro-safety attitudes.

Changing perspective, appears that implementation of OHS management systems (in particular voluntarily) focuses mainly on "safety" component, taking less into account adverse health effects, although officially they claim to address both components. Certainly, many organizations aim to make efforts to improve health, safety and wellbeing at work conditions. Some companies have given these conditions such a high level of priority that, beyond legislative requirements, and they are trying to create a culture of safety built into their corporate culture. In such companies, health and safety management is really an integral part of overall business management and safety issues are incorporated into overall management processes. These companies are aware that to be effective, and actions must be made in the previously implemented management systems (quality, environment, etc).

Successful implementation of OHS issues in the everyday practices of business management requires, firstly, access to information and knowledge in the field. Competent national authorities, employers 'organizations and workers' representatives should cooperate, through joint efforts dedicated to creation of new OHS channels of support and information, especially for SMEs. An emphasis should be put on achieving more effective communication and consultation between the competent authorities, employers and workers and the establishment of review and benchmarking systems, properly and periodically to monitor progress.

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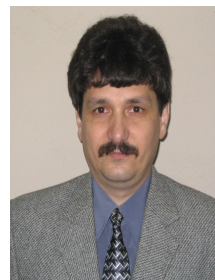
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